

Identifying Social Memory and Place in the Old North Bridge

Lizzie Nelson

“The past of a place is as open to a multiplicity of readings as the present,”

(Massay 1995: 185)



I have lived two miles from the Old North Bridge in Concord, Massachusetts for eleven years. During that time, the bridge began to fade into the background of my daily life. I was aware of its presence, and that it was steeped in my country’s history, but it did not affect my daily life. Last summer, my understanding of this place began to change. For the first time, I brought one of my British friends home to experience America through my eyes. One of our first stops was the Old North Bridge.

As we walked down the hill to the bridge, we encountered a mother and her two sons. The mother was kneeled down beside her children, reading out aloud the message

on the first, very large memorial. The message read, "Grave of the British Soldiers. They came three hundred miles and died to keep the past upon its throne. Unheard beyond the ocean tide the English mother made her moan, April 19, 1771." I had read this message before, but I had not considered its significance.

We left the mother and her sons behind as we crossed the bridge. My friend observed how interesting it was that at American Revolutionary site there was a memorial dedicated to the "British enemy." He hadn't spoken long before the two boys jetted from behind us carrying sticks screaming, "die British solider, die." They claimed they were "reenacting" the battle.

At the time we laughed at the incident, thinking how ironic it was that my British friend was on the Bridge at the same time as the boys 'reenactment.' However, during my research this memory became more significant. The two boys, their mother, my English friend, and I all had different perspectives of the bridge as a source of social memory and place. The boys were American tourists who had come with their mother in hopes of understanding the relevance of the Bridge in relation to their heritage. My friend saw the Bridge as a distant part of his British history, as well as a symbol of American identity. For me, as a local, the Bridge had become a backdrop of the town. The Bridge's history had become entwined with my personal memories of walks with my family, my summer jogs and picnics in the nearby park. All five of us were occupying the same place, but each saw it through very different lens.

The Bridge in Relation to Social Memory and Place

Social memory of place is composed by two anthropology theories: social memory and place. Paul Connerton (1989) explains that social memory affects how we view the past and present. It refers to how a social group remembers an event, or interprets an object, based on their previous history (Connerton 1989). Due to the complexity of social memory, each group will have a different perspective of an object or event.

Social memory is also defined as a collective memory. In other words, an entire social group shares the understanding. Connerton (*ibid*) suggests it is formed through the components of a communal environment. However, social memory is a continuous process in which the “act of the portrayal never stops” (*ibid*: 17). Through defining, gossiping, writing, and teaching, the ideas of the social group are passed on to each other, and to future generations. This means, even our most personal memories, in which we are alone, exist in relationship to the social understanding of the group. The way that we understand our memory is comparison to past places, items, dates, and languages that the group creates for us. Everyone lives within a predisposed framework of outlines impacted by a person’s culture, traditions, and knowledge (*ibid*: 37). Once again, these frameworks are shared among a community, stringing them together.

The Old North Bridge can also be defined as a source of place and space. This refers to meanings that people contribute to their surroundings. Low (2003) believes that people socially construct a place by experiencing it. This experience can be first hand or through photographs and books. It is the encounter that creates and defines

the meaning of a place. Ingold takes this a step further by saying, “the landscape tells—or rather is—a story,” (1993:52). In both of these interpretations, space takes unique meaning, for it becomes a replication of understanding.

There are different categories of place (Cresswell 2006). Low (*ibid*) would describe the Bridge as an “inscribed place” because of the relationship between people and the land. People’s experiences and memories are embedded in the Bridge. He claims, “place can have a unique reality for each inhabitant, and while the meanings may be shared with others, the views of place are often likely to be competing, and contested in practice” (2003:15). The use and purpose of a place depends on those who view and experience it. On the other hand, Cresswell views “place” as a unique and limited category. He defines place as a limited version of space, characterized by its unique social interaction. A place only comes into being through people’s interaction with it (Cresswell 2006: 11).

Place and social memory overlap in many ways. In fact, people’s different understandings of a place stems from their differing social memories. This leads back to my experience with my British friend at the Old North Bridge. Although my friend, the two boys, their mother and I were all at the same place, we all saw the Bridge very differently.

During my research, I tried to understand these three different views of the Old North Bridge. I did this by visiting the Bridge several times during the course of the week. While I was there, I conducted very brief interviews with the people walking by. I asked them what drew them to the Bridge, where they were from, and how they

understood it. These encounters were supplemented with longer interviews with the tour guides stationed at the Bridge. They gave me the opportunity to understand the general trends of people who came to the Bridge, as well as the type of questions people asked. Finally, I visited the Concord Museum to see how the Bridge was presented to American and international tourists, because this would affect the way they saw the Bridge and its history.

Brief History of the Old North Bridge

In order to understand the different perspectives of the Bridge, it is important to have a basic understanding of the Bridge's historical significance. The Battle of Concord took place at the Bridge, marking the very beginning of the American Revolutionary War in the mid 1700s. For the first time, the American colonialists, known as "Minute Men", shot at the British soldiers. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a famous American writer, claimed that this was "the shot heard around the world". Today, the Bridge serves as a symbol of American history. On either side of the Bridge stands a memorial. The first is to the British soldiers who died (Photo A), and the second is to the American Minute Men (Photo B).